

21st Sunday after Pentecost + October 17, 2021
Mark 10:32-45, "The Temptation of Tyranny"
Grace Lutheran Church, Hatfield, PA
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In Confirmation we are beginning to look at Martin Luther's Small Catechism. This past Wednesday we learned that a "catechism" is a teaching tool that takes complex stuff and makes it easier to understand.

This, in fact, is exactly what Jesus is doing for his disciples at the beginning of today's Gospel. He is giving them a catechism about what is going to happen to him: "The Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; ³⁴they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again."

As Martin Luther knew, asking questions is a big part of catechetical training. So in his Small Catechism, every statement about faith by the question: "Was ist das?" "What does this mean?" Which is of course where the learning really happens.

So wouldn't you think the disciples would be riveted by the catechism that Jesus has just given them? Shouldn't they all be asking: "Yes, master, but what does this mean?"

What happens is exactly the opposite. Not only do they ignore him, but James and John jump to a majorly wrong conclusion about what Jesus is saying is going to happen. They assume Jesus is about to pull off a political coup and take over, seated in glory on the emperor's throne. This wrong assumption leads them to make a shocking power grab. They are thinking, if Jesus is going to unseat the Roman emperor, destroy the government, and take control, they definitely want a piece of the power. After all, didn't they leave Jesus on the spot to follow him, abandoning their father in his boat? They deserve this. Their demand makes clear they want to be first in line to get top seats in the new administration: "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

We have heard the phrase "power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." The full quote actually goes like this: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men."

The sad truth this conveys is that, as a person's power increases, their moral sense almost always diminishes. We can already see this happening with James and John, because the first thing that comes out of their mouths after making their terribly wrong assumption is: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." Who do they think they are? Or rather, who are they becoming? You can see the dial of their moral barometer swiftly jerking over into the red.

The seeds of tyranny germinate in the poisonous soil of exclusive self-concern. Everyone in the first-century Roman Empire was familiar with the reality of tyranny, tyrants being rulers who had no legal limits on what they could do. One after another the emperors all demonstrated that they were men

drunk on power. Augustus Caesar demanded that he be worshiped at the son of god. Caligula treated senators and soldiers like dirt or worse, but gave his horse its own house with a marble stall and ivory manger, and if he hadn't stabbed to death at age 40 he would have appointed that same horse to the high office of Roman consul. Nero branded Christians as an illegal sect, had Paul and Peter brutally murdered, and allegedly set Rome on fire so that he could build himself a new palace in the middle of the destroyed city. Domitian was so paranoid that he banned free speech.

So here in today's Gospel we find James and John putting themselves at the center of the universe. "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." Jesus replies, totally exasperated: "You have NO idea what you're asking! Are you willing to go through what I am about to enter into?" In other words, are you really willing to be one at my right and one at my left...on the cross? Are you ready to be crucified alongside me?"

Anyone in their right mind would say, "Uh, well, no." But these two have temporarily lost their right minds, so they answer: "We are able." The comedy continues when the other disciples get wind of what James and John are jockeying for. Who are they to get in there first with their request for high-ranking appointments? An argument breaks out. They all want a piece of the action. Jesus basically has to get out his megaphone. "Remember how the Gentiles--meaning non-Christians--live! They have rulers who lord it over the people and the so-called great ones are actually tyrants." Jesus continues, his voice now dripping with sarcasm: "But this is not happening among you." Meaning, YES IT IS--but you had better snap out of it.

The path of the tyrant leads only to death--brutal death, as world history has shown over and over. Tyrants may appear to prevail for a time, as they and their followers become convinced of the illusion of their invincibility. But at some point truth always breaks in because that's what truth does. The lies then come crashing down, and things end badly for the tyrant.

The real question for us is, why do human beings crave power? From whence comes the tyranny of temptation? Like every source of evil in the world, it comes from fear, the primal fear that festers within each of us that we are not good enough. That who God created us to be is not good enough.

In all things, God, in his infinite wisdom, has given human beings the freedom to choose. Where fear is concerned, people often make the choice to give into that fear, the that who they are is not enough. Giving in to this fear means giving in to the lie that only power can save you, power that is acquired illegally or immorally, and then used as a weapon to push others down while lifting yourself up. Power that gives you the illusion that you have beaten death, when in fact you are in the very process of digging your grave.

But God doesn't just give us a choice and leave it at that. God asks us to choose him. Scripture sings this to us again and again: Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live! (Deuteronomy) Seek good and not evil, that you may live! (Amos) Choose the life that is already ours in God's own Son, the life that shattered the power of death, the life that is found not in being served but in serving others. Choose the life offered to us by the one who we find not seated on a high throne but kneeling at our feet. Choose Christ! Amen.